



Practical Wisdom and Professional Practice: Character, Virtues and Professional Purpose

Stephen Earl

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Stephen Earl

Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, University of Birmingham, UK

The Professions enjoy a unique and privileged place in the public eye. They are relied upon for moral probity, diligence, fairness and resolve. Professionals are expected to do the right thing for individuals – be they clients, customers, patients, students, or civilians – and for society at large. Over recent years, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has conducted a significant amount of research across UK based professions. This work has explored professionals' character and virtuous practice within the distinct confines of the legal profession (Arthur et al., 2014), medicine (Arthur et al., 2015a), education (Arthur et al., 2015b), business (Kristjánsson et al., 2017a), nursing (Kristjánsson et al., 2017b), and the Army (Arthur et al., 2018). Whilst practitioners will operate in distinct professional spheres, this present paper aims to look more broadly across professions to unearth commonalities or distinctions in professionals' character that may be telling of a 'good' professional. By examining the professions at large, this paper seeks to combine the perspectives of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and positive psychology to offer new empirical findings regarding the conceptual understandings of character in professional life.

In accord with a neo-Aristotelian perspective to virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2009), all professionals are expected to make character-based judgements within their practice, based upon a value of moral and intellectual virtue. These character-based judgements should, in theory, facilitate professional practice that is ethically sound and based upon appropriate ethical justifications. Thus, valuing the combination of moral and intellectual virtue should equip practitioners for consistent ethically sound professional conduct, even in the varying work situations they may face on a daily basis. In addition, professionals require a sense of purpose for their work that extends beyond themselves and contributes to a wider common good for the sake of others and society (Moore, 2017). Yet, prevailing cultures of managerialism, auditing, and performance metrics has increased the pressure on contemporary professional life, appearing to widen the divide between the moral principles and purposes that underpin the professions and the realities of professional practice (Holbeche and Springett, 2004; Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2011). The present paper adopts a profiling analytical approach to identify groups of professionals that vary in their perceived excellences of character. Specifically, two studies are presented that how examined how such character groups may differ in perceived professional purpose (Study 1) and ethical action choices and justifications (Study 2). In addition, differences in perceived purpose were assessed across distinct profession types and in relation to perceived work-related constraints.

Philosophical Background

A central tenet of a neo-Aristotelian philosophy is the notion that an individual must develop positive and stable character traits, known as virtues, to enable themselves, and to allow others in society, to

flourish (known as *eudaimonia*; Aristotle, 2009, p.5 [1095a17-21]). Virtues characterised as moral in nature, such as honesty and kindness, are viewed as intrinsically good in the extent they are good in themselves and good for their own sake (MacIntyre, 1981a). Alternatively, virtues such as perseverance, teamwork, resilience and leadership potentially serve an instrumental good in so far as their pursuit is directed towards a moral and selfless end (Gardner and Shulman, 2005). Despite some debate over the status of such instrumental qualities as ‘virtues’ (see Moore, 2015: S107), these instrumental virtues constitute enablers for professionals to be able to employ moral virtues and may be particularly valuable for professionals given that they are habitually directed and associated with pursuits of excellence and success, even under conditions of adversity. As such, moral and instrumental virtues in combination are philosophically proposed to comprise an integral foundation for ethical and purposeful professional practice and decision-making.

In addition to moral virtue, a professional is required to think and exercise deliberation when making judgments about specific courses of action (Carr, 2018). A professional may be faced with the dilemma of making decisions that are recommended by internal personnel within their profession but which may also conflict against those demanded from external agents, such as customers, stakeholders or government (Moore, 2015). In such instances, intellectual virtues, such as judgement, perspective, prudence and critical-thinking, would need to be exercised to ensure actions and decisions are undertaken for the right reason, at the right time. Collectively, intellectual virtues form a central component of the overarching meta-virtue known as *phronesis*, or virtue of thought (i.e. “practical wisdom” or “good sense”, Aristotle, 2009, p.106-107). This concept of *phronesis* is fundamental to a neo-Aristotelian account of ethical conduct, acting as a moral integrator when two virtues clash and adjudicated all virtuous action (Kristjánsson, 2015). A professional whom operates with, and employs, practical wisdom will be open-minded, recognise the true variety of circumstances and potential consequences of their decisions, and be thoughtful and decisive in the action that they take (e.g. Kotzee *et al.*, 2016).

Character and Professional Purpose

A central principle of a neo-Aristotelian philosophy of virtue is that human life and action is grounded in a declared purpose (i.e. *telos*; MacIntyre, 1981a). The logic follows that ‘good’ professionals will possess, and exercise, moral and intellectual virtues that are conducive and constitutive for what professionals need to serve a purposeful and “good” end (Moore, 2015). Empirical evidence has shown various moral and intellectual virtues to be independently associated with greater experiences of meaning at work, as well as higher positive experiences, engagement, and ambition which are synonymous with a sense of purpose (e.g. Allan and Duffy, 2014; Gander *et al.*, 2012; Harzer and Ruch, 2012; 2013). By definition, all professionals are proposed to be moral agents with a responsibility to advance the flourishing of society beyond the profession in which they practice (Tanchuk *et al.*, 2016). In addition to these morals, professionals’ require intellectual virtue is a fundamental component of balancing and deliberating the ethical standards of their duty to serve the interests of their immediate clients and society at large. As such, moral and intellectual excellences of character may epitomise essential resources for professionals to fulfil the ethical objectives of the true professional. The role of the professional requires a capacity to deliberate and make judgements with a distinct ethical dimension, and encompasses more than an exclusive mastery of technical skill or knowledge in a particular field (Carr, 2018). Greater expectations

are traditionally placed on professionals to exercise personal morals and ethically-informed judgment towards a higher societal benefit than other tradespersons or ‘workers’. Consequently, the notion of professional purpose reflects, and is defined in this report, as a personal commitment, volition and motivation to do useful work for the betterment of others and society which sees beyond immediate individual or organisational goals (Kempster *et al.*, 2011). Exploring the interplay between professionals’ moral and intellectual virtue may offer valuable insights to help ascertain why certain practitioners vary in their commitment towards purposeful activity.

Character and Moral Judgement

The contribution of a neo-Aristotelian approach to the analysis of professional ethics, is to highlight the ways in which professionals draw on their qualities of character to make moral judgements appropriate and sensitive to the professional context in which they find themselves (Carr *et al.*, 2011: 3-4). Moral judgment being an evaluative process in regards to whether potential actions and behaviours are perceived to be moral or immoral (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009). Previous evidence regarding professional actions has shown employees reporting high moral character profiles displayed less harmful or delinquent work behaviours, and had less lenient attitudes toward unethical negotiation tactics as compared those lower in moral-character (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014). In addition, reports of integrity, bravery, and social intelligence were found important for business executives’ performance at work with moral integrity having the greatest contribution (Sosik, Gentry, & Chun, 2012). In a military context, soldiers’ displays of moral courage were associated with both ethical and pro-social behaviours in their service (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011). Thus, moral virtue seems to have close connotations with professionals’ displays of moral action. Investigating how professionals’ ethical action choices and justifications may be influenced when moral virtue is accompanied, or not, with intellectual virtue may provide empirical weight to Aristotle’s claim for the phronetic professional.

Research Aims

There were three over-arching aims of the present paper. The first aim was to identify specific virtues that may be fundamental within the broad professional domain and thus better suited to investigating variation in practitioners’ professional purpose and moral reasoning. Assessment of virtue has traditionally been born out of positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) by identifying individual’s most endorsed character strengths, synonymous with virtues¹. The virtues that practitioners most value in their private life may differ to those they give prominence to in professional life (e.g. Harzer and Ruch, 2013; Saldaña *et al.*, 2014). Moore (2015) insinuates a notion of “corporate character” in which an organisation will nurture the pursuit of excellence in internal (i.e. the business product) and external (e.g. financial prowess and reputation) goods (also see Beadle and Moore, 2011). Thus, the first of the research was to examine differences in practitioners’ perceived important virtues in their personal life compared to those valued in their professional domain. Identifying specific virtues that may

¹ The fundamental distinction being that positive psychology refers to the amount of experience in specific strengths, whereas Aristotle advocates the mean experience of virtues are better rather than the overall quantity (Kristjansson, 2015; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2006).

be fundamental to professionals personally as well as those important for a broad professional context may be useful knowledge for professional bodies to ensure these virtues are nurtured within the general working context.

The second, and primary, aim of the research was to employ a person-centred methodology to identify distinct groups of professionals based on their value of moral and intellectual virtue. The majority of studies have traditionally adopted a variable-centred approaches to examining virtue, demonstrating exclusive associations between specific virtues (e.g. Andersson et al., 2007; Peterson, et al., 2009; Waters, 2012) or categories of virtues (e.g. Harzer and Ruch, 2015) with outcomes such as job satisfaction, well-being, professional responsibility and a sense of calling at work. Aristotle's proposition that professionals require a value of moral and intellectual virtue in conjunction may be better suited to a person-centred methodology to examine professionals' character more holistically (Bergman and Andersson, 2010). Professionals that value intellectual virtue at the expense of moral virtue may be at risk of developing losing sight of the wider purpose their profession is intend to serve and may be suspect to self-serving motives that do not correspond with ethical professional judgments. Alternatively, professionals that value moral virtue but not intellectual virtue may be limited in their reasoning to make ethically sound and purposeful decisions. Espousing a person-centred approach lends itself well to examine professionals' character typology more holistically and explore the overriding conception of a purposeful professional *telos*.

It is also recognised that practitioners operate in unique professional domains and within distinct institutional cultures (Carr, 2018). Overarching objectives, standard principles of practice and regulatory codes of conduct will differ across professions. Thus, a third objective of the research is to consider the influence that the professional domain and perceived work environment may have on practitioners' sense of professional purpose.

Summary of Study 1

Participants

A total of 2,340 professionals ($M_{age} = 36.48$, 60% female) participated in the study, deriving from the professions of medicine ($n = 19\%$), law ($n = 25\%$), teaching ($n = 12\%$), business ($n = 23\%$) and nursing ($n = 21\%$). With regards to stage of career, 49% of the participants were entry-level professionals, having just completed their course of study or professional training, with the remaining 51% representing established professionals with at least five years of practical experience in their respective field.

Measures

Personal and Professional Virtues

Participants' personal virtues were assessed using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Participants were asked to ranking their top six virtues out of a possible 24 in both their personal and professional domains. The 24 specific virtues were: Appreciation of Beauty; Bravery; Creativity; Curiosity; Fairness; Forgiveness; Gratitude; Honesty; Hope; Humility;

Humour; Judgement; Kindness; Leadership; Love; Love of Learning; Perseverance; Perspective; Prudence; Self-Regulation; Social Intelligence; Spirituality; Teamwork; Zest.

Professional Purpose

Professionals' perceptions of their sense of professional purpose were assessed using six positively worded items, adapted from a Europe-wide workplace survey (Eurofound Working Conditions Survey, 2010). In line with the definition of professional purpose (e.g. Kempster *et al.*, 2011), these items tap into professionals' personal feelings of commitment and engagement towards their work (e.g. *"I am motivated to work to the best of my ability"* and *"I am emotionally involved in my work"*), their sense of volition towards their work (e.g. *"I am able to apply my own ideas in my work"* and *"I am able to influence decisions that are important for my work"*), and their perception of doing meaningful work for the betterment of society (e.g. *"I have the feeling of doing useful work to make a social contribution"*). Participants read the stem *"Please indicate how often this has been the case in the environment in which you work"* and rated each item on a 5 point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). All items loaded appropriately onto a single factor (all above .60) and demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$).

Work-Related Constraints

Professionals' perceptions of negative feelings and organisational constraints in their work environment were measured using six negatively worded items taken and adapted from the Europe-wide workplace survey (Eurofound Working Conditions Survey, 2010). These items assessed professionals' experience of negative affect at work (e.g. *"I experience stress"* and *"My work requires that I hide my feelings"*), as well as perceptions of the environment preventing them from being themselves (e.g. *"My work involves tasks that are in conflict with my personal values"* and *"My work requires that I hide my feelings"*). Participants read the stem *"Please indicate how often this has been the case in the environment in which you work"* and rated each item on a 5 point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). All items loaded appropriately onto a single factor (all above .48) and demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .70$).

Data Analysis

Paired sample T-tests were conducted to examine if the value professionals placed on each virtue differed across their personal and professional domain. Virtues valued highly across both the professional and personal domains were retained for the subsequent clustering procedure, as well as any virtues found to be ranked statistically higher in the professional domain compared to the personal domain. The retained virtues were subsequently categorised as either moral or intellectual based on a neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue (see Kristjánsson, 2015, p.17). A composite mean score for moral and intellectual virtue was calculated and converted to a z-score to be used as clustering criteria to group professionals. Univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for gender and stage of career, were conducted to examine differences in professional purpose across character profiles and between different professions, respectively. Significant ANCOVA were followed up by post-hoc comparisons to explore specific group differences. Multiple linear regression was used to examine the relationship between perceived work-related constraints, stage of career and professional purpose.

Findings

The virtues of honesty, fairness, teamwork, leadership, kindness, perseverance, and bravery comprised the moral virtue grouping variable, whereas the virtues of creativity, judgement, love of learning, perspective, prudence and self-regulation encompassed the intellectual virtue grouping variable. Based on these two variables, four distinct character profiles of professionals were identified. Firstly, an *alternative character* profile (19%) comprising of professionals that valued both moral and intellectual virtue below the sample average. An *intellectual character* profile (26%) was characterised by professionals only valuing intellectual virtue above the sample average but not moral virtue. A *moral character* profile (40%) comprised of professionals valuing only moral virtue above the sample mean. Finally, a *phronetic character* profile (15%) that valued both moral and intellectual virtue above the sample average.

The phronetic group were found to be statistically higher in perceived professional purpose than the alternative and intellectual groups, but not the moral group. The alternative group were found to be statistically lower in reported professional purpose than all other groups. These differences were found even when controlling for gender and stage of career. Separate analysis also revealed teachers and nurses reported statistically higher professional purpose compared to doctors, business professionals, and lawyers, respectively. In contrast, lawyers were found to report statistically lower perceived professional purpose than all other professions. Finally, practitioners perceiving lower work-related constraints and were further into their professional career were more likely to report higher professional purpose than practitioners entering the profession and perceiving higher work-related constraints.

Summary of Study 2

Participants

A sample of 240 junior army officers were recruited ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.06$, 22% female, 78% male) through liaison with the British Army at their respective training institutions and select garrisons. The officers' rank within the army ranged from cadet (31%), lieutenant (25%), captain (38%) and major (6%). Of the officers, 95% were British with the number of years served ranging from 1 to 7 years (Mean Years = 2.25). Furthermore, 40% of the officers belonged to infantry or artillery regiment whereas the remaining 60% were categorised in a non-infantry or artillery unit.

Measures

British Army Values

British Army officers' endorsement of Army were assessed using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson and Seligman, 2004) with virtues adapted to match British Army values (see Arthur et al., 2018). On the whole, the 24 virtues almost identically mirrored the original items of the VIA used in Study 1. Participants rated each virtue on a 5 point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly *Disagree*)

to 5 (*Strongly Agree*), to indicate the extent they feel each virtue is ‘an essential part of who they are in the world’.

Army Officer Dilemmas

The army officers responded to four separate ethical dilemmas from the Army Intermediate Concept Measure which was adapted from a previously developed measure in the United States Army, specific to army officers (Army Leadership Ethical Reasoning Test [ALERT], see Turner, 2008). A value of the AICM is that it not only assesses appropriate choice of action to specific military scenarios but it also provides an indication of the appropriateness of their reasoning underpinning this action. Army officers rated a series of possibly action choices to each dilemma on a 5 point scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly believe that this is a BAD choice*) to 5 (*I strongly believe that this is a GOOD choice*). Subsequently, the officers rated a series of reasons for their chosen action on a scale from 1 (*I strongly believe that this is a BAD reason*) to 5 (*I strongly believe that this is a GOOD reason*).

Data Analysis

In contrast to Study 1, only personal reports of the 24 specified were collected and thus all 24 virtues were included in the profiling process. Each virtue was categorised as either moral or intellectual in nature, with the two composite variables being used to group the officers based on their character typology. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to investigate how the four character profiles differed in both identifying (i.e. percentage match with expert panel) and reporting (i.e. self-reports) in the outcomes of action choices and action justifications in response to the army ethical dilemmas.

Findings

Four character profiles were identified that differed in their mean scores for moral and intellectual virtue. A *low character group* (31%) reporting low mean scores in both moral and intellectual virtue. As the army officers rated the virtues, this group reflects a low character group as opposed to the ‘alternative’ label used in Study 1 when the virtues were ranked in hierarchy. An *intellectual character group* (18%) reported higher endorsement of in the intellectual but not moral virtues, whereas a *moral character group* (15%) comprised of officers endorsing moral at the expense of intellectual virtues. Lastly, a *phronetic character group* (36%) emerged which included officers endorsing moral and intellectual virtues in combination.

In regards to choice of action, no significant differences were found across the four character profiles in the extent they could identify good and bad action choice options. In contrast, the low character group were found to be statistically more likely to believe bad action statements were appropriate courses of action compared to the moral character and phronetic character groups, but not the intellectual group. Regarding officers’ justifications for action choices, the phronetic character group were statistically better at identifying good justifications for their action compared to the low character group, but not the intellectual or moral character groups. No significant differences were found across the four character profiles in identifying bad justifications action choices. Furthermore, the phronetic character group were statistically more likely to report good justifications for their actions as important compared

to the low character and intellectual character groups, but not the moral group. No specific character group differences reached conventional levels of statistical significance in reports of bad justifications for ethical dilemma.

General Discussion

The present paper takes a more holistic view of professionals' character, identifying four distinct groups of professionals based on differences in their value and endorsement of moral and intellectual virtue. The empirical findings highlight the importance for professionals to develop a phronetic character profile. That is, one that encompasses both moral and intellectual virtue simultaneously as opposed to in isolation of one another. Professionals reporting a phronetic were found to experience higher professional purpose, were less likely to report unethical action as appropriate, and were more likely to justify their actions on 'good' ethical reasons. It is telling that, across both studies, this phronetic group only differed in these professional outcomes with groups lower in both virtues types and those endorsing only intellectual virtue, but not with profiles exclusively endorsing moral virtue. Moral virtue may be a central component for developing a sense of professional purpose that extends to a wider good end, as well as grounding professional practice upon moral justifications. Indeed, the true professional should aim to capture the moral dimensions of their practice in order to safeguard the rights of clients and to specify the responsibilities of service providers (Tanchuk *et al.*, 2016). Yet, the present findings indicate that moral virtue in isolation may not be enough to facilitate to optimal professional purpose or moral reasoning. Ethical professional training programmes may be best served by being grounded upon an impetus towards the moral implications of professional practice. Subsequently, the development of intellectual virtue may then help professionals decipher the true meaning of being a professional and what constitutes 'good' professional action in accord with a moral compass (Moore, 2017).

On the contrary, professionals that lack moral and intellectual virtue in combination appear to be at a greater risk of losing sight of the purpose of professions and may be more likely to choose unethical practices. The low character group in Study 2 was found to not only report moral justifications as less important but appeared less able to identify these moral justifications in comparison to the phronetic character group. Professionals will often be trained in differentiating between ethical and unethical courses of action, however, these low character professionals may be unaware of the moral considerations for their practice and may be limited in the extent they deliberate on such moral implications when choosing a course of professional action. Regular ethical training based upon excellences of character may be of substantial value for such professionals to help enhance their consideration of the ethical implications for their practice. In light of incidents of professional malpractice, methods of nurturing moral judgement and deliberation in professionals may be important for enhancing ethical, purposeful practice, as opposed to exclusively instructing professionals regarding specific conduct to follow.

Examining the composition of practitioners' character offers a unique opportunity to look into what may constitute a "good professional". It is recognised, however, that professionals also operate within distinct spheres that entail profession-specific requirements which also require consideration. Comparisons of the different professions revealed that teachers and nurses reported a greater sense of professional purpose than business, medical or legal professionals. As professions, teaching and nursing

are vocational, 'people' professions, in which they have a prima facie commitment to the ethical care of others, be it the education or healthcare of the public (Carr, 2011). In principle, both professions are underpinned by overt affective and emotional dimensions of 'ethics of care' which require a deeper level of personal commitment towards others, rather than the self (Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2015; Swanson, 1993). In contrast, participants from the legal profession reported the lowest sense of professional purpose across the five professions. One would argue that a lawyer's sense of purpose is to uphold the law of a just and fair society, yet the demands of clients and ultimate beholding profit motives appear more synonymous with a private sector profession. In this sense, participants from the legal profession may have responded to the professional purpose items from the perspective of the benefit to individual client(s), rather than to any wider societal or community good. The reconciliation of these conflicting responsibilities may require further consideration within the legal profession. Thus, in developing a sense of purpose in professionals, professional bodies cannot ignore the bespoke and inherent requirements or objectives of their specific profession.

A profession is not "merely a passive container that holds the virtues of its members" but can embody a generative, or maladaptive, context that fosters or diminishes virtue (Bright *et al.* 2014, p.456). In this vein, reports of professional purpose were found to be higher when practitioners perceived lower work-related constraints in their professional context and were more established in their professional career. When professionals experience negative emotions, feel unsupported in their required work and in conflict with their personal values, they may find less meaning in their work (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, professionals that are overburdened with limited time and workload pressures will likely experience lower well-being and satisfaction at work (Blau, 2000; Duffy *et al.*, 2012), which may in turn reduce performance and productivity (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001). In more recent times, traditional professions have developed cultures in which relationships have become more transactional and mistrustful, aiming to meet commercial or materialistic objectives (Holbeche and Springett, 2004). Such pressurising and instrumentally focused climates may have a negative influence on professionals' satisfaction and engagement with their work (Victor and Cullen, 1988). Furthermore, established professionals may be better placed to identify with the purpose of their profession through the experience they have accrued. This sense of purpose may develop over time, through practice, and through developing an idea of what is important to them as professionals, in order for them to best fulfil their roles.

Conclusion

Overall, the person-centred approach in the present paper helps uncover the complex interplay between moral and intellectual virtue within a broad professional context, and opens the door for further research to be conducted regarding moral character in the professional realm. The findings highlight the importance of moral character in shaping practitioners' sense of professional purpose, ethical action choices and moral reasoning; however, this moral compass needs to be accompanied with an endorsement of intellectual virtue. From a neo-Aristotelian interpretation, these findings potentially indicate the 'good' professional, one that might exhibit *practical wisdom*, as habituating moral standards along with a degree of deliberation and judgement into their practice. Professional bodies and regulators may be best placed to ensure that ethical training programmes for practitioners emphasise the moral implications of 'good' professional practice, in the first instance, and subsequently provide

practitioners with the opportunities to develop and employ their own judgement and deliberation towards moral decision-making. In addition to the individual professional, the present findings emphasise the influential role that the working environment and professional context may have on practitioners' sense of professional purpose. Professionals that experience time restrictions, unfair treatment and stress at work may be prone to lose a sense of purpose. This may be most prominent for early practitioners just entering their profession. Inferring from the present findings, it seems important that professional regulatory bodies ensure working environments facilitate professionals' development and demonstration of moral character and professional purpose, both at the onset and latter stages of their career.

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